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**Pakistani PM sparks Outrage among Afghanis
at the OIC Conference**

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On 19 December 2021, the 17th Session of the Emergency Meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation was convened in Pakistan for discussing the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. In his address to the Foreign Ministers' Council, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan uttered two remarks that sparked outrage.

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First, the Pakistani PM suggested that Afghanistan's incapability to deal with the Islamic State terrorist organization is a threat to Pakistan.¹ Secondly, he suggested that the Taliban regime's treatment of women, and specifically the restriction on female education, was intrinsic to Afghan culture.²

Afghanistan's former President Hamid Karzai also condemned the statements, deepening the outrage of Afghans who consider his political failures the main cause of the country's current state. On social media, Afghan users in exile accused Imran Khan of spurning the country's history. Influencers in the diaspora joined the criticism, triggering a discussion on national culture and identity, as well as on women's role in Afghan society.

The discourse that evolved points to a growing formation of an Afghan digital counterpublic, understood as "any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities."³ In the digital space online Afghans are able to challenge predominant conceptions of Afghan identity and Islamic culture, in the context of the opposition against the Taliban regime and its supporters.

Many Afghan users refer to the glorious Afghan past, a time frame between the 1920s until the 1970s, when the country modernized and sought to contain ethnic divisiveness. Part of this process was also the progressive inclusion of women in the educational system and the public space. In this way, they express their vision of a future Afghanistan and deprecate the incapacity of former leaders to stabilize the country.

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai was among the first voices reacting on Twitter, and he described PM Imran Khan's speech as "an attempt to sow discord

¹ Rajab Tayeb, "[Hamid Karzai: Pakistan should not interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs](#)" *Tolo News*, 19 December 2021 [in Persian].

² "[Imran Khan's Statement at OIC Meeting Criticized](#)" *BBC News*, 20 December 2021 [in Urdu].

³ Marc Lamont Hill, "[Thank You, Black Twitter': State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance](#)" *Urban Education* 53:2, 2018 (286–302), p. 287.

among Afghans, and an insult to the Afghan people.”⁴ His post was attacked by a number of users, who called him a traitor,⁵ corrupt, and the cause of Afghanistan’s disgrace,⁶ who did nothing for the country when he had the chance.⁷ Beyond the opposition to the Taliban regime, Afghans express their anger and sense of deception against political elites that over two decades proved to be incapable, or unwilling, to transform the country.

Some commentators also saw in Karzai’s Tweet an opportunistic move to gain legitimacy by misappropriating popular frustration. As Afghan writer Haroon Amirzada put it, the condemnation of Khan’s assertions served Karzai as a revenge against Pakistan, which does not confer to him any representative role of Afghans today.⁸

In the absence of a political representation in exile, people of diverse extraction express their opinions, often referring to the country’s extraordinary development during the 1960s and 1970s. Recalling the country’s past serves a twofold purpose: first, it is a political reference of what Afghanistan could still be; secondly, it contributes to countering the belief that certain traditions, restrictive of women’s rights and wrapped in the halo of an Islamic-sanctioned rules, are somehow essential components of Afghan identity.

A self-identified Afghan refugee shared a photo from the late 1950s featuring Afghan female teachers,⁹ willing to show that women were an integral part of Afghan society before the civil war and Taliban rule. That chapter of Afghan history occupies a marginal place in today’s collective memory.

The main concern for the younger generations is that they have no reminiscence of what Afghanistan used to be, while war, inter-ethnic conflict, and tribal codes have become the only reality they know. This concern is shared by artists and

⁴ [@KarzaiH](#), *Twitter*, 21 December 2021.

⁵ [@w_khorasani](#), *Twitter*, 20 December 2021.

⁶ [@Donneso1](#), *Twitter*, 20 December 2021.

⁷ [@HomelandPersian](#), *Twitter*, 20 December 2021.

⁸ Haroon Amirzada, “[Why do Pakistanis Disregard Karzai’s Services to the Enslavement of Afghanistan to Pakistan?](#)” *The Afghan Paper*, 22 December 2021 [in Persian].

⁹ [@MuhibKhan12345](#), *Twitter*, 20 December 2021.

intellectuals who seek to rebuild a collective memory of the time before the civil war. Filmmaker Roya Sadat is working on “The Forgotten Parts of History,” a movie set in Afghanistan during the 1960s and 1970s, whose main characters are two women and aiming to show the country and its society beyond the narrative of the conflict.¹⁰

In other cases, TV stars are the prominent voices of counter-narratives. Singer and activist Aryana Sayeed has strongly condemned Imran Khan’s remarks, defending the role of women in Afghan history and culture: “remind yourself that Afghanistan has been the land of literature, poetry and much more since the time YOU and YOUR COUNTRY did not even exist on this planet!!” reads her aggrieved post on Instagram.¹¹

On Facebook, she also posted a picture of Imran Khan between the poet Jalal as-Din Mohammad Rumi (a.k.a. “Mowlana”) and the poetess Rabia al-Balkhi.¹² Hailing from the city of Balkh in current Afghanistan, they both become symbols of integration into the Persian cultural space as well as of national pride. Moreover, Rabia al-Balkhi represents Afghan women’s contribution to culture.

¹⁰ Naman Ramachandaran, “[HAF: ‘The Forgotten History’ Project Moves Beyond Afghanistan Stereotypes to Explore Friendship](#)” *Variety*, 15 March 2021.

¹¹ [Aryanasayeedofficial](#), *Instagram*, 21 December 2021.

¹² [Aryana Sayeed](#), *Facebook*, 20 December 2021.



The post shared by Afghan singer Aryana Sayeed showing the image of Pakistani PM Imran Khan between poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi and poetess Rabia al-Balkhi.

The discussion among Afghans and Pakistanis following this post revolves around questions of identity, women's rights, and attachment to Afghan culture in the diaspora. While some responses attacked Aryana Sayeed for singing and dancing, a supposedly inappropriate behavior for an Afghan woman, most of the users shared her views recalling pre-Taliban times, such as the educational reforms during the 1920s, which extended education to women. A number of voices also focused on the ancient history of Afghanistan and the prestige of the Persian language over Urdu, a recurrent motif in political diatribes between Afghans and Pakistanis.

The animosity ensuing from Pakistan's influence over the Taliban and the consequences on Afghan instability were well expressed in response to the BBC article on Imran Khan's speech shared on Facebook.¹³ Here, the discourse also focused on culture and identity. Some users stressed the superiority of Afghan culture to which the Urdu language and literature owe a great deal; while others highlighted the cultural differences among Afghanistan's ethnic groups and the consequent differences in women's social standing.

¹³ [BBD Dari](#), Facebook, 20 December 2021.

The voices that participated in this diatribe show political opposition to the Taliban regime and the forces backing it, and also reveal defiance to predominant conceptions of women and their role in society. As such, they appear to constitute an emerging Afghan digital counterpublic.

While the dominant discourse did not revolve around openly feminist arguments, by highlighting the role of women in the country's history and sharing the image of poetess Rabia al-Balkhi, the Afghani digital counterpublic paves the way to vocalize women's issues within the debate on Afghanistan's political and social problems. In this frame, users in the homeland and in the diaspora discuss their sense of belonging, memorialize a forgotten past, and challenge the dominant understanding of Afghan identity and women's role.

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